



VINTAGE

THE BLUEST EYE

TONI MORRISON

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Toni Morrison

Dedication

Title Page

Foreword

Autumn

Winter

Spring

Summer

Afterword

Copyright

About the Book

The Bluest Eye chronicles the tragic, torn lives of a poor black family in 1940s Ohio: Pauline, Cholly, Sam and Pecola. Pecola, unlovely and unloved, prays each night for blue eyes like those of her privileged blond white schoolfellows. She becomes the focus of the mingled love and hatred engendered by her family's frailty and the world's cruelty as the novel moves toward a savage but poignant resolution.

About the Author

Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. She is the author of many novels, including *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved* (made into a major film), *Paradise* and *Love*. She has also received the National Book Critics Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize for her fiction.

ALSO BY TONI MORRISON

Fiction

Sula
Song of Solomon
Tar Baby
Beloved
Jazz
Paradise
Love
A Mercy
Home

Non-fiction

*Playing in the Dark:
Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*
*Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power:
Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the
Construction of Reality*

(editor)

The Nobel Lecture in Literature

*Birth of a Nationhood:
Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case*

(coedited with Claudia Brodsky Lacour)

The Dancing Mind

TO THE TWO WHO GAVE ME LIFE
AND THE ONE WHO MADE ME FREE

TONI MORRISON
The Bluest Eye

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Foreword

There can't be anyone, I am sure, who doesn't know what it feels like to be disliked, even rejected, momentarily or for sustained periods of time. Perhaps the feeling is merely indifference, mild annoyance, but it may also be hurt. It may even be that some of us know what it is like to be actually hated—hated for things we have no control over and cannot change. When this happens, it is some consolation to know that the dislike or hatred is unjustified—that you don't deserve it. And if you have the emotional strength and/or support from family and friends, the damage is reduced or erased. We think of it as the stress (minor or disabling) that is part of life as a human.

When I began writing *The Bluest Eye*, I was interested in something else. Not resistance to the contempt of others, ways to deflect it, but the far more tragic and disabling consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate, as self-evident. I knew that some victims of powerful self-loathing turn out to be dangerous, violent, reproducing the enemy who has humiliated them over and over. Others surrender their identity; melt into a structure that delivers the strong persona they lack. Most others, however, grow beyond it. But there are some who collapse, silently, anonymously, with no voice to express or acknowledge it. They are invisible. The death of self-esteem can occur quickly, easily

in children, before their ego has “legs,” so to speak. Couple the vulnerability of youth with indifferent parents, dismissive adults, and a world, which, in its language, laws, and images, re-enforces despair, and the journey to destruction is sealed.

The project, then, for this, my first book, was to enter the life of the one least likely to withstand such damaging forces because of youth, gender, and race. Begun as a bleak narrative of psychological murder, the main character could not stand alone since her passivity made her a narrative void. So I invented friends, classmates, who understood, even sympathized, with her plight, but had the benefit of supportive parents and a feistiness all their own. Yet they were helpless as well. They could not save their friend from the world. She broke.

The origin of the novel lay in a conversation I had with a childhood friend. We had just started elementary school. She said she wanted blue eyes. I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish. The sorrow in her voice seemed to call for sympathy, and I faked it for her, but, astonished by the desecration she proposed, I “got mad” at her instead.

Until that moment I had seen the pretty, the lovely, the nice, the ugly, and although I had certainly used the word “beautiful,” I had never experienced its shock—the force of which was equaled by the knowledge that no one recognized it, not even, or especially, the one who possessed it.

It must have been more than the face I was examining: the silence of the street in the early afternoon, the light, the atmosphere of confession. In any case it was the first time I knew beautiful. Had imagined it for myself. Beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could *do*.

The Bluest Eye was my effort to say something about that; to say something about why she had not, or possibly ever would have, the experience of what she possessed and also why she prayed for so radical an alteration. Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And twenty years later, I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale? The novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her.

The reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties stirred these thoughts, made me think about the necessity for the claim. Why, although reviled by others, could this beauty not be taken for granted within the community? Why did it need wide public articulation to exist? These are not clever questions. But in 1962 when I began this story, and in 1965 when it began to be a book, the answers were not as obvious to me as they quickly became and are now. The assertion of racial beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural/racial foibles common in all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze. I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female. In trying to dramatize the devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause, I chose a unique situation, not a representative one. The extremity of Pecola's case stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family—unlike the average black family and unlike the narrator's. But singular as Pecola's life was, I believed some aspects of her woundability were lodged in all young girls. In exploring the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to literally fall apart, I mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some

monstrous, all the while trying hard to avoid complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to. That is, I did not want to dehumanize the characters who trashed Pecola and contributed to her collapse.

One problem was centering the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing. My solution—break the narrative into parts that had to be reassembled by the reader—seemed to me a good idea, the execution of which does not satisfy me now. Besides, it didn't work: many readers remain touched but not moved.

The other problem, of course, was language. Holding the despising glance while sabotaging it was difficult. The novel tried to hit the raw nerve of racial self-contempt, expose it, then soothe it not with narcotics but with language that replicated the agency I discovered in my first experience of beauty. Because that moment was so racially infused (my revulsion at what my school friend wanted: very blue eyes in a very black skin; the harm she was doing to *my* concept of the beautiful), the struggle was for writing that was indisputably black. I don't yet know quite what that is, but neither that nor the attempts to disqualify an effort to find out keeps me from trying to pursue it.

My choices of language (speakerly, aural, colloquial), my reliance for full comprehension on codes embedded in black culture, my effort to effect immediate coconspiracy and intimacy (without any distancing, explanatory fabric), as well as my attempt to shape a silence while breaking it are attempts to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black American culture into a language worthy of the culture.

Thinking back now on the problems expressive language presented to me, I am amazed by their currency, their tenacity. Hearing "civilized" languages debase humans,

watching cultural exorcisms debase literature, seeing oneself preserved in the amber of disqualifying metaphors —I can say that my narrative project is as difficult today as it was then.

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play.

Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house they are very happy see jane she has a red dress she wants to play who will play with jane see the cat it goes meow-meow come and play come play with jane the kitten will not play see mother mother is very nice mother will you play with jane mother laughs laugh mother laugh see father he is big and strong father will you play with jane father is smiling smile father smile see the dog bowwow goes the dog do you want to play do you want to play with jane see the dog run run dog run look look here comes a friend the friend will play with jane they will play a good game play jane play

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisvery prettyhereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthe greenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappyseejaneshehasar eddressshewantstoplaywhowillplaywithjaneseethecatitg

oesmeowmeowcomeandplaycomeplaywithjanethekitten
willnotplayseemothermotherisverynicemotherwillyoupl
aywithjanemotherlaughslaughmotherlaughseefatherhei
sbigandstrongfatherwillyouplaywithjanefatherissmiling
smilefathersmileseethedogbowwowgoesthedogdoyouwa
nttoplaydoyouwanttoplaywithjaneseethedogrundogr
unlooklookherecomesafriendthefriendwillplaywithjanet
heywillplayagoodgameplayjaneplay

Autumn

Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did. Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year. But so deeply concerned were we with the health and safe delivery of Pecola's baby we could think of nothing but our own magic: if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right.

It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds. Once we knew, our guilt was relieved only by fights and mutual accusations about who was to blame. For years I thought my sister was right: it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that of all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too.

There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.

NUNS GO BY as quiet as lust, and drunken men with sober eyes sing in the lobby of the Greek hotel. Rosemary Villanucci, our next-door friend who lives above her father's

cafe, sits in a 1939 Buick eating bread and butter. She rolls down the window to tell my sister Frieda and me that we can't come in. We stare at her, wanting her bread, but more than that wanting to poke the arrogance out of her eyes and smash the pride of ownership that curls her chewing mouth. When she comes out of the car we will beat her up, make red marks on her white skin, and she will cry and ask us do we want her to pull her pants down. We will say no. We don't know what we should feel or do if she does, but whenever she asks us, we know she is offering us something precious and that our own pride must be asserted by refusing to accept.

School has started, and Frieda and I get new brown stockings and cod-liver oil. Grown-ups talk in tired, edgy voices about Zick's Coal Company and take us along in the evening to the railroad tracks where we fill burlap sacks with the tiny pieces of coal lying about. Later we walk home, glancing back to see the great carloads of slag being dumped, red hot and smoking, into the ravine that skirts the steel mill. The dying fire lights the sky with a dull orange glow. Frieda and I lag behind, staring at the patch of color surrounded by black. It is impossible not to feel a shiver when our feet leave the gravel path and sink into the dead grass in the field.

Our house is old, cold, and green. At night a kerosene lamp lights one large room. The others are braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice. Adults do not talk to us—they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall down they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us are we crazy. When we catch colds, they shake their heads in disgust at our lack of consideration. How, they ask us, do you expect anybody to get anything done if you all are sick? We cannot answer them. Our illness is treated with contempt, foul Black Draught, and castor oil that blunts our minds.

When, on a day after a trip to collect coal, I cough once, loudly, through bronchial tubes already packed tight with phlegm, my mother frowns. “Great Jesus. Get on in that bed. How many times do I have to tell you to wear something on your head? You must be the biggest fool in this town. Frieda? Get some rags and stuff that window.”

Frieda restuffs the window. I trudge off to bed, full of guilt and self-pity. I lie down in my underwear, the metal in my black garters hurts my legs, but I do not take them off, for it is too cold to lie stockingless. It takes a long time for my body to heat its place in the bed. Once I have generated a silhouette of warmth, I dare not move, for there is a cold place one-half inch in any direction. No one speaks to me or asks how I feel. In an hour or two my mother comes. Her hands are large and rough, and when she rubs the Vicks salve on my chest, I am rigid with pain. She takes two fingers’ full of it at a time, and massages my chest until I am faint. Just when I think I will tip over into a scream, she scoops out a little of the salve on her forefinger and puts it in my mouth, telling me to swallow. A hot flannel is wrapped about my neck and chest. I am covered up with heavy quilts and ordered to sweat, which I do—promptly.

Later I throw up, and my mother says, “What did you puke on the bed clothes for? Don’t you have sense enough to hold your head out the bed? Now, look what you did. You think I got time for nothing but washing up your puke?”

The puke swaddles down the pillow onto the sheet—green-gray, with flecks of orange. It moves like the insides of an uncooked egg. Stubbornly clinging to its own mass, refusing to break up and be removed. How, I wonder, can it be so neat and nasty at the same time?

My mother’s voice drones on. She is not talking to me. She is talking to the puke, but she is calling it my name: Claudia. She wipes it up as best she can and puts a scratchy towel over the large wet place. I lie down again. The rags have fallen from the window crack, and the air is

cold. I dare not call her back and am reluctant to leave my warmth. My mother's anger humiliates me; her words chafe my cheeks, and I am crying. I do not know that she is not angry at me, but at my sickness. I believe she despises my weakness for letting the sickness "take hold." By and by I will not get sick; I will refuse to. But for now I am crying. I know I am making more snot, but I can't stop.

My sister comes in. Her eyes are full of sorrow. She sings to me: "When the deep purple falls over sleepy garden walls, someone thinks of me. ..." I doze, thinking of plums, walls, and "someone."

But was it really like that? As painful as I remember? Only mildly. Or rather, it was a productive and fructifying pain. Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it—taste it—sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base—everywhere in that house. It stuck, along with my tongue, to the frosted windowpanes. It coated my chest, along with the salve, and when the flannel came undone in my sleep, the clear, sharp curves of air outlined its presence on my throat. And in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repinned the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die.

It was autumn too when Mr. Henry came. Our roomer. Our roomer. The words ballooned from the lips and hovered about our heads—silent, separate, and pleasantly mysterious. My mother was all ease and satisfaction in discussing his coming.

"You know him," she said to her friends. "Henry Washington. He's been living over there with Miss Della Jones on Thirteenth Street. But she's too addled now to keep up. So he's looking for another place."